

# 30 June 2022. Climate | Art

The climate change conversation is about talking to power. // Giving the art back.

 **Andrew Curry**  
1 hr ago



Welcome to Just Two Things, which I try to publish daily, five days a week. Some links may also appear on my blog from time to time. Links to the main articles are in cross-heads as well as the story. A reminder that if you don't see Just Two Things in your inbox, it might have been routed to your spam filter. And there's unlikely to be a Just Two Things tomorrow.

## 1: The climate change conversation is about talking to power

Julia Steinberger has a piece on her blog about visiting her old school in May to talk about climate change. It wasn't a good experience for her. She was, she writes,

given a masterclass in our failings.

She'd done similar talks in 2019, pre-pandemic.

Back then, the mood was electric, excited, engaged. The students had taken control of the agenda: they were going to put the concerns and needs of their generation front and centre. They were going to get things moving.

This time around, not so much:

I sensed it as I was speaking, a general muttering in the auditorium full of 16–17-year-olds, that sometimes ebbed a bit, but never really went away. I thought the students might be bored by the specific aspects I was talking about. Sources of emissions, trends, specific impact probabilities, types of mitigation actions ...

No, that wasn't the problem. She discovered what the problem was when a young woman took the microphone during the Q&A. She said more: but her perspective came down to this:

"All these people in power have known about this problem for so long. Yet the IPCC comes out with report after report explaining we have to act within just a few years — and nothing happens, nothing changes. Why do you think this talk of yours to us can do anything?"

Of course, readers will recognise this criticism in a heartbeat, as did Steinberger. Her first conclusion: she had forgotten to listen. They knew all of her material about the IPCC and the data. What they needed to talk about was power:

They knew about citizen action, voting, protests, but none of that had worked, and they didn't see an arc of struggle they could learn from or push further. They didn't need to hear about emission trajectories: they needed to hear about trajectories of popular struggle, when and how people without power changed the world.

As it happened she had the opportunity to apply these lessons soon enough. Since she had a session with her university students that very afternoon, she asked them what was driving the school pupils' sense of frustration and betrayal. She got a long list very quickly.



(Graffiti pattern, San Diego. Via pxhere.co. CC0)

One was about the rolling climate change show: lots of announcements, lots of meetings, no action. Related: "everyone knows, but no one is acting as if it matters". Also related: the reports are getting more urgent, but no-one's behaviour changes.

At the same time, brands are on the bandwagon, but most of it is greenwashing. And the response to the Russia-Ukraine war shows that people can act when they want to, but just not for climate change.

There was an interesting perspective on politicians:

Teenagers look up to adults (really!), as responsible people who give them guidance and protect them... Seeing politicians who know what is going on but not acting, and grown-ups around them the same, is deeply upsetting to them."

Sitting behind this was a deeper issue: that when the school strikes started there was a lot of climate denial around. That's gone now, but behaviour hasn't changed:

Now the climate crisis is much more prominent, but since no one is acting, it seems there is a deliberate collective choice to condemn many human beings to death.

And from that, a related perspective on the roots of inaction:

The system is stuck, bogged down. No one knows how to shift it. In fact, grown-ups identify with the system more than they do with the reality of the climate crisis.

She has written this piece at speed, to get it out there, and she summarises some lessons at the end—and some changes she's already tried out with her university students.

I learned that the youth who brought the climate crisis to the attention of the world don't necessarily see that attention as a victory. Back then, when there was silence and denial, inaction could be explained by climate not being enough of a topic for anyone to care or act... And as a result, inaction is now perceived as a deliberate, inevitable choice. The hurt and despair are immense.

She uses a striking analogy to underline this point:

It's like coming to a Victorian school and pointing out to the students that sticks are used to beat them, and that beatings hurt. Like, duh. They know already. What they need to know is how to take the stick away from the adults.

So in the afternoon, having had the conversation with her university students, she taught her IPCC material differently. Instead of going through the sections on the problems, she turned instead to the sections on sectoral solutions:

I went through the IPCC AR6 WG3 slides on sectoral solutions, and we discussed each in turn, to the extent of my competence. We also discussed state capture, industrial lobby groups, vested interests and barriers to change, new technologies and colonialism, and seeing one's work as striving to achieve systemic change. It was one of the best teaching experiences I've ever had... it didn't feel like betrayal any more.

I can't really follow that, but one note from me. We haven't even got to the beginning of the politics of climate change yet, but that these are powerful emotions which could translate into radical and angry politics when they are channelled into political action.

It will likely be a generational politics as well: one of the problems we have at the moment is that most of our politicians are just too damn' old. And I think we'd better hope that that transition comes soon enough to actually effect some meaningful change. Because otherwise that generational politics could easily become a politics of retribution.

(Thanks to Ian Christie for the link.)

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## 2: Giving the art back

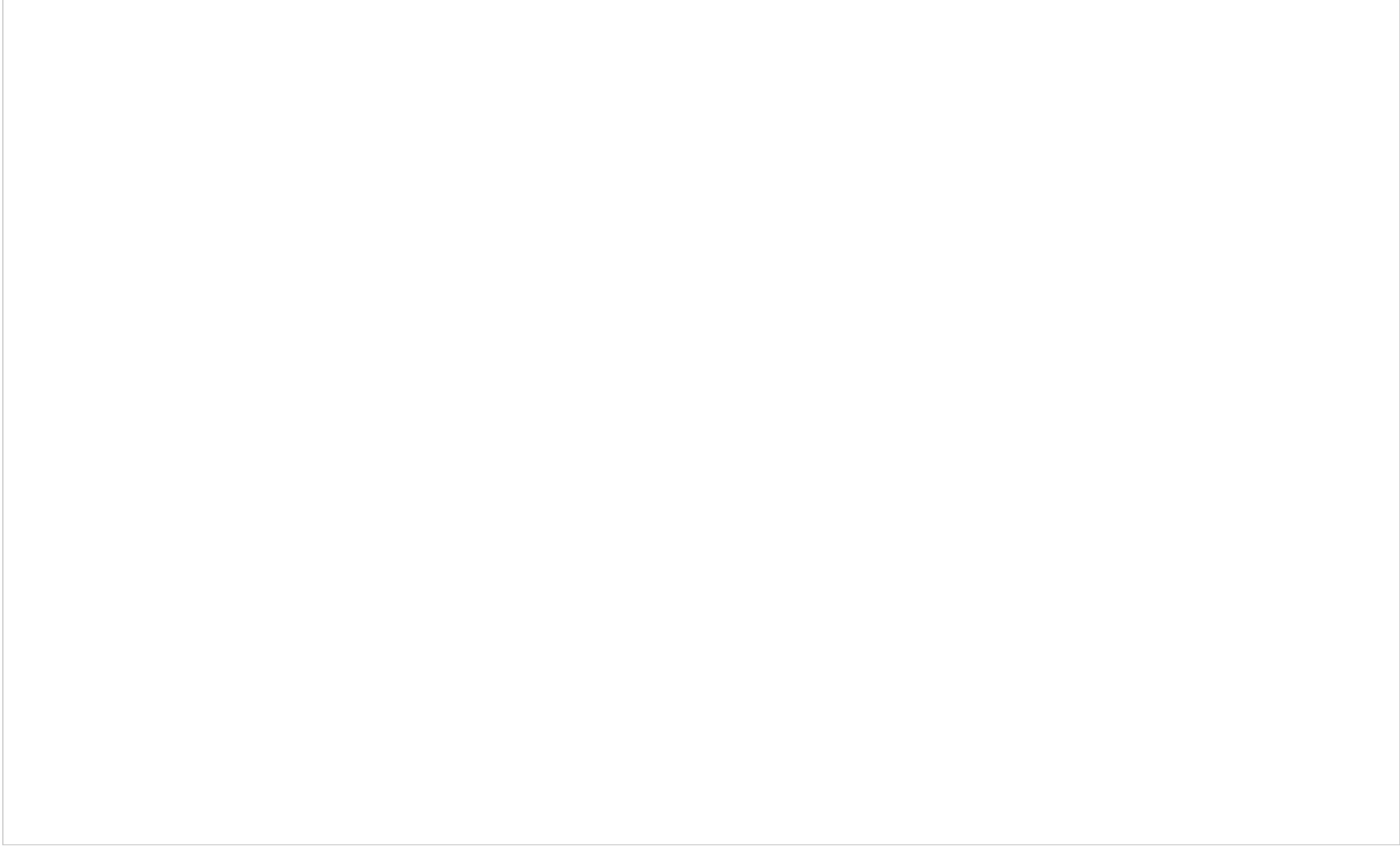
During 2021, the Magnum photographer Patrick Zachmann followed the process of returning 26 artworks from France to Benin, royal treasures that had been in France since being captured by French troops in 1893.

The restitution was a big deal, and involved a French Act of Parliament. This is why the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, the last French home for the paintings, was pleased to have Zachmann document the work involved. The photographer has some of his work in the Musee already. His photographs follow the work of packing the work up and transferring it to Benin, through to its first exhibition in the country.

The Musee's President, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, put it like this:

With Patrick Zachmann's offer in the fall of 2021 to document the return to Benin of 26 works from the royal treasures of Abomey, a simple truth had emerged: the historical weight of the moment called for the eye of a photographer who has proven himself to be a great witness of his time... Today, both French and Beninese cultural history are richer by virtue of his precise, perceptive and respectful view of his subject matter.

The Magnum article is long, since it includes material from Gaëlle Beaujean, in charge of the Africa collections at the Musee, on the history of their original capture. It's an everyday story of 19th century colonialism, in which a French expeditionary force takes control of the country; the expedition commander finds the royal treasures hidden; and then gifts them to the French government. I hope that Zachmann and Magnum will forgive me for sharing one of his photos here:



(Several objects, previously in storage, are taken out by Gaëlle Beaujean, in charge of the African collections, to be shown to a scenographer and additional specialists in preparation for a final, week-long exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, France, 2021. © Patrick Zachmann | Magnum Photos)

When the works were transferred to the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, in 2006, the museum put them into a historic and cultural context. Ten years later the Republic of Benin formally asked for their return. Initially this was turned down under a French law dating from 1566, but the mood changed a year later when President Macron indicated that they should go back. Even then the political path wasn't completely smooth: a Senate vote against had to be reversed.

When you see the list of items, though, it's clear they ought to be in Benin and not France:

The 26 objects taken in Abomey by Dodds were officially returned on November 9, 2021... The Benin protective statues of King Ghezo, King Glele as a lion-man and King Behanzin as a shark-man are presented; the two immense ceremonial thrones of the Ato ceremony; the throne of Cana, on which the king is represented surrounded by his wives, mounted above enchaind slaves; the doors of the palaces; a series of altars in precious metals and iron to honor the ancestors; a wooden stool and a calabash engraved with motifs readable only by the initiated; ceremonial weapons of soldiers; a military uniform and weaving accessories.


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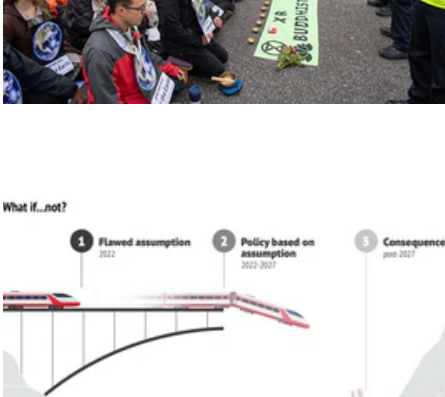
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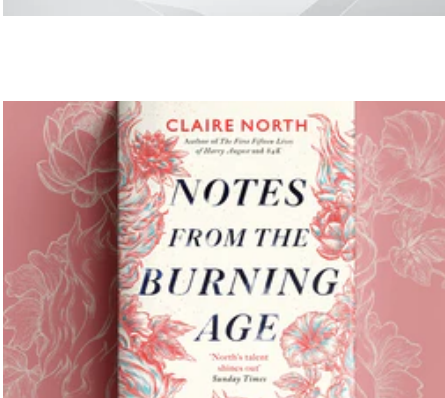





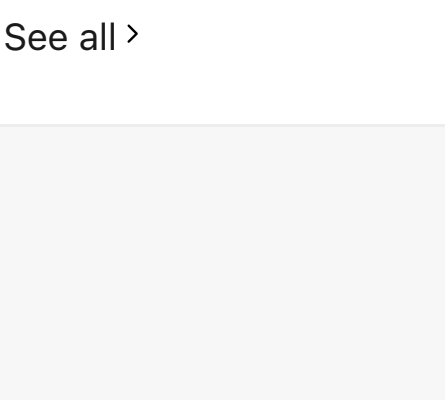
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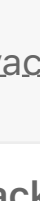
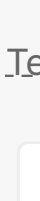
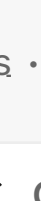
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